

Gerald Heffelfinger #50

February 19, 1985

Q: Mr. Heffelfinger, when did you first join the Army?

A: I joined the Army in 1935, September. I was in the infantry then so I had five years experience in the infantry before I went to Hickam.

Q: When did you go to Hickam?

A: I went to Hickam in August 20th, 1940.

Q: What was your first job over there at Hickam?

A: My first job over there was I went to motor vehicle school and motor vehicle school I was in the motor pool. Then I didn't care too much about working around vehicles so I was taken out of the motor pool and went to the warehouse... supply.

Q: How long did you work there at the warehouse?

A: Well, I worked at the warehouse I believe from around March '41 until October '41. That's when I went into the fire department.

Q: How did you happen to get sent over to the fire department?

A: Well, they have a Sgt. in the fire department that had over ten years service. He was buying out and they needed another Sgt. down there. Instead of making one of the other firemen a Sgt. they picked me out. The Major called me in and told me he wanted me to go to the fire department. The reason he picked me out was because I was able to handle men and get along with men, so he said he wanted me to go down there and take a months honest trial at it.

Q: Were you in charge of the fire department there?

A: I was Asst. Chief working under Chief Benedict. Then when the War came along, Chief Benedict didn't stay there very long because he came out to the fire station that morning when the attack was started and he was wounded very shortly after he came. He was wounded out there between hangar 7 and 11 and then from then on I was in charge of the fire department under a Lt. named Tom.

Q: How many fire engines did the Hickam Fire Department have?

A: Hickam Fire Department at that time had four. We had one outside cleaning it up when the attack started. That was put out of commission right away. One of the others parked in the front

of the Station half way into the Station, that was put out of commission also; was strafed. So that left us with only two firefighters... I mean two fire trucks left.

Q: What were you doing when the attack started?

A: I was outside with the men supervising cleaning the fire truck.

Q: What was the first thing that gave you a hint that something out of the ordinary was happening?

A: Well, while we were cleaning the fire trucks, I looked down towards Hickam Pier and right there by the entrance to the channel I could see a flight of aircraft coming across, it must have been about ten of them all in formation and it wasn't long after we saw them that some of them peeled off and went into Pearl Harbor side and we could hear the noise; the bombing. We knew then what it was. So it wasn't long after that they came across and came into Hickam and the first bomb hit into hangar 7 and they strafed it at the same time they strafed the fire truck. When we saw the bomb coming into hangar 7, that's when we moved to run inside the Station.

Q: Once you got inside the Station what did you do?

A: Well, after we got inside the Station we got the fire trucks... one fire truck procedure was in case of an air attack or anything one fire truck was supposed to take a crew and go around the Base and sound a siren and let them know that it was an alert.

Q: Did they do that?

A: Yes, we did that. Then the other fire truck (they had already strafed and bombed the mess hall) so the other fire truck, we took that and laid out the hose line and went to go over to fight the fire at the mess hall because the other hangars and all was bombed... hangar 7. Wasn't much that could be done with that. It was just about gone already.

Q: What source did you have for water when you fought the fire at the mess hall?

A: We were using the fire hydrant right out in front of the barracks. But later on, the next second attack was when they dropped a bomb, I think it was meant for hangar 7, but instead of hitting hangar 7 it went right into... landed in the middle of the road and broke the water main there. Also, it set on fire the gas line there along Hangar Avenue. We put that gas fire out with foam. It only took us a couple of minutes to put that out.

Q: How long did you spend fighting that fire at the mess hall there?

A: Well, I think it took us about two days before we got all fire out in the big barracks, because it was kind of complicated. We didn't have no ladder to reach the top of the barracks and we saw the roof. We saw this copper, and underneath was wood, and underneath the wood there was concrete, so it was kind of hard to get at the fire. That's why finally we had to go up from the middle of the barracks and get up on the roof and pull lines up and start to remove some of the metal on the roof so we could get in there and put the water on the wood.

Q: Sounds like a pretty tough job.

A: Oh yeah it was. Because I didn't have much experience when I first went in there. I was only in the fire department 68 days when the War came along. But I was able to pick up the work pretty fast because I took an interest in it after I went in there and especially after the bombing... I got quite a bit of experience then.

Q: Yeah, it's a real incentive to know your job.

A: Yeah.

Q: What other places did you fight fire on that day?

A: Well, we was fighting for a while over at the Hangar with the other fire truck when it came back from the run around the Base. And after the second wave it was, Honolulu Fire Department came in. They came in there and we told them to go in there and fight the fire and we took our truck out and went over to the barracks side to give the other truck a hand. But Honolulu Fire Department had to use a hole in the road where they drafted water out.

Q: Sounds like a pretty confused situation!

A: Yeah.

Q: What thoughts were going through your minds? What feelings did you have while all of this was going on?

A: Well, the five years I had in the infantry before coming to Hickam, that's what prepared me for that day. Because in the infantry they teach you if you're under attack to take cover. And whenever an attack came in, when they come across from the first, or second, or third attack, then you could see which way they were coming. All you had to do was just move a little bit, right or left, take a little cover, and you'd be alright.

Q: Were any of the men from the Hickam Fire Department killed or injured on that day?

A: Yes, there was a fellow named Sgt. Joseph Chagnon and one Pvt. [Mathew T.] Bills. They were killed there. It happened in an area by the barracks. Then they had the six other men was

wounded. I think one was named Jack McGuire, Raymond Bunn... I don't remember the rest of the names. And then on the last wave that came across, I was standing under a palm tree there. I figured that maybe that when they started strafing, I figured maybe they wouldn't see me there. But somehow or other they must have saw me because one small arms bullet went right through my helmet at the top... fire helmet, and just grazed my head a little; just had a scalp wound. So I didn't bother much about it; didn't pay much attention to it, until that night about midnight the Lt. in charge, he sent me to the dispensary to have it taken care of. Then I came right back to duty again.

Q: When you think back on that day, what stands out in your mind the most vividly? What do you remember the best?

A: Well, I think that part I remember the best was surprise when we attacked by the Japanese planes. We didn't expect that at that time. I'll tell you, that sure surprised us. I'll never forget that.

Q: What was the situation on the Base at Hickam? Was it pretty confused?

A: Was what?

Q: Was it pretty confused?

A: Well, I wouldn't say it was so confused, but I still... a lot of them, the soldiers, I think it's the reason how they got wounded or killed, they was out there waving at the planes when they come across, and I think the pilots, they just took advantage of that and strafed them.

Q: Were there any American planes that came in during the Attack?

A: No. I believe it was later in the afternoon, that the B-17's came in from the Mainland. They were due in that day and they came in late in the afternoon. I think right just about the last attack, they came in. But I don't think none of them was damaged; not the B-17s.

Q: After the attack was over and the fires were out, what did they have the Fire Department do then?

A: Well, that day on the attack, was the Fire Marshall came out from Ft. Shafter, Col. Bopree(??)

Q: Do you remember how to spell his name?

A: Pardon?

Q: Do you remember how to spell his name?

A: No, I don't (laughter). He came out from Ft. Shafter. He give us a hand supervising the Fire Department. He stayed there the whole day and then the... I believe it was the next day, they have a supply yard down in Honolulu (Ft. Armstrong I believe it was) and we got a couple new fire trucks from there and we... So then within about two months I think we had about seven fire stations open all around Hickam.

Q: That's quite an increase!

A: Yes, it was. Then also, that same afternoon... late that afternoon, they sent us in 65 men. They picked out 65 servicemen and sent them into the Fire Department. So they gave us a hand. After that they stayed right in the Fire Department. We had to train them. So right after the attack we had a lot to do. We had all those new men to train and then to set up the new fire stations.

Q: Sounds like quite a job.

A: Yes it was.

Q: Were thing pretty tense after the attack?

A: Yes, it was pretty tense, especially in the evening of December the 7th. Some of the Navy personnel was a little trigger happy around 9:00 at night. You could hear them shooting the machine guns over there at Pearl Harbor. Thought something was coming in. They left them fly. Then after the attack, every morning, about 5:00, you could hear the Dawn Patrol going out from Pearl Harbor.

Q: Anything else you remember; you have to add?

A: (silence) There was a lot of cleaning up around the Fire Station to be done too, right after the attack. We cleaned it all up and we stayed right there in the barracks, even though there was no windows in there or nothing, but we still stayed in there.

Q: Did the Fire Station take any hits during the attack?

A: There was no direct hit on the Fire Department by any of the bombs, but the front of the Fire Station was all strafed. Close as they came to hitting the Fire Station was about 6 feet away on the last attack. The bomb hit right in the sidewalk and rocked the Station; caused all the plaster to fall off the ceiling.

Q: OK well thank you.

A: OK.